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Audience engagement in the Middle East press: An exploration of “networked journalism” amid the new media landscape

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Abstract

Many news outlets no longer stop with the simple publication of an article or a broadcast report, but actively engage the audience. For instance, the British newspaper The Guardian recently issued social media guidelines for its reporters, encouraging them to enter into conversations with the audience via Twitter and Facebook. Other news outlets have adopted methods that allow readers to help direct the news. Al Jazeera English regularly asks its audience to submit questions for guests and also broadcasts user-created videos offering commentary. CNN’s iReport project invites viewers to contribute their own raw footage of events and, occasionally, structured news reports taken from cell phones, Flip cameras, and other portable devices. Some outlets have engaged in crowdsourcing, in which audience members are asked to help provide information about an event. Journalism observers have called this new paradigm “networked journalism,” defined by the audience’s participatory role in actively shaping the news. Building on other research on networked journalism, this paper explores how several Middle Eastern newspapers, both English and Arabic, have chosen to embrace the new media landscape. A qualitative review of each news outlet’s new media activities—particularly on their websites, Twitter feeds, and Facebook pages—reveals to what extent and to what benefit they have embraced “networked journalism.” The paper concludes with suggestions for improving audience engagement as well as highlighting best known practices of networked journalism.

Audience engagement in the Middle East press: An exploration of “networked journalism” amid the new media landscape

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Abstract

Many news outlets no longer stop with the simple publication of an article or a broadcast report, but actively engage the audience. For instance, the British newspaper The Guardian recently issued social media guidelines for its reporters, encouraging them to enter into conversations with the audience via Twitter and Facebook. Other news outlets have adopted methods that allow readers to help direct the news. Al Jazeera English regularly asks its audience to submit questions for guests and also broadcasts user-created videos offering commentary. CNN’s iReport project invites viewers to contribute their own raw footage of events and, occasionally, structured news reports taken from cell phones, Flip cameras, and other portable devices. Some outlets have engaged in crowdsourcing, in which audience members are asked to help provide information about an event. Journalism observers have called this new paradigm “networked journalism,” defined by the audience’s participatory role in actively shaping the news. Building on other research on networked journalism, this paper explores how several Middle Eastern newspapers, both English and Arabic, have chosen to embrace the new media landscape. A qualitative review of each news outlet’s new media activities—particularly on their websites, Twitter feeds, and Facebook pages—reveals to what extent and to what benefit they have embraced “networked journalism.” The paper concludes with suggestions for improving audience engagement as well as highlighting best known practices of networked journalism.

Perhaps the most unusual star to emerge from the Arab Spring was an American journalist, based in Washington, D.C., who couldn’t speak Arabic. Andy Carvin worked for National Public Radio as a social media aggregator. He served as an aggregator for the tsunami of information flowing out of the Middle East via Twitter and other new media sites. Carvin collected, analyzed, fact-checked, and verified these reports. His efforts—and surely his NPR credentials—helped guide mainstream outlets in their coverage of 2011’s biggest story. Carvin relied on other Twitter stars who helped aggregate information from non-traditional news sources (Kiss, 2011). Tweepsters like the UAE’s Sultan Al Qassemi (@SultanAlQassemi), Egypt’s Mahmoud Salem (@SandMonkey), and Bahrain’s Zaynab al-Khawaja (@AngryArribiya) helped cover the Arab Spring in a manner never seen before. Perhaps more than any other news event, the Arab Spring forced mainstream media outlets to embrace social media—including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—in ways previously not necessary.

Some have called this new type of reporting “networked journalism,” with the idea that audiences can work with professionals to create effective, compelling journalism. In previous research, Duffy (2011) showed that Al Jazeera English had made great strides toward embracing networked journalism. This study extends the research by examining how local media outlets in the Middle East have embraced social media and audience engagement through networked journalism.

This article sheds light on current practices in an evolving journalism landscape. Since so much scholarship overlooks the Middle East, the author hopes to help lead journalism scholars to more fully understand and embrace “networked journalism”—particularly in a region where local news outlets (in contrast to satellite news stations) appear hesitant to embrace social media and networked journalism.

Models of Journalism

Attempting to categorize types of journalism can prove troublesome, particularly as the media landscape alters rapidly in the 21st century. Nip (2006) examined the scholarship and pointed to five broad types of journalism: traditional, public, interactive, participatory, and citizen journalism. He defined traditional journalism as conventional reporting in which the producers create news and audiences digest it. The other four models recognize differing levels of audience engagement. For instance, public journalism (or “civic journalism”) sees news consumers as part of news creation, with invitations to editorial board meetings or opinion polls. Interactive journalism is not much different but puts more emphasis on using technology to spur involvement. Participatory journalism invites the audience to help make news. Bowman and Willis (2008) said the audience should play “an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (para. 4). The emphasis is on publishing first and filtering later, breaking the heavy gatekeeping role for the media producers that the other models embrace. In the final category, citizen journalism, a wide variety of people produce the news, not only professional journalists. Citizen journalism differs from the other models by removing the authority of the professional journalist.

Perhaps the trouble with these models is their lack of clear boundaries. Arguing that interactive journalism is separate and distinct from public journalism seems counterintuitive; the line between participatory and interactive journalism also seems difficult to find. As for citizen journalism, context seems to determine the boundaries. Is an amateur’s report still citizen journalism after being published by a mainstream media outlet? Kperogi (2011) examined CNN’s citizen journalism vehicle iReport and concluded that “the trend toward corporate-sponsored citizen media may, in the final analysis, blur the distinction between citizen and mainstream journalism” (p. 1).

To these categories of journalism, some scholars have added a new term, “networked journalism,” which describes the current tech-infused, interactive journalism. Coined by Jeff Jarvis in 2006, the term “networked journalism” was meant to replace “citizen journalism.”

‘Networked journalism’ takes into account the collaborative nature of journalism now: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product. (Jarvis, 2006, para. 2)

Jarvis wanted to emphasize that journalism needs to evolve and embrace collaboration and the sharing of sources. At that time, such engagement with the audience was anathema to many traditional journalists. Those attitudes have shifted over the last five years, but some news outlets still don’t embrace collaboration.

One of the most important concepts behind networked journalism is the importance of using and linking to other sources of information, even if those sources are competitors. Networked journalists accept that audiences can easily get their news from a variety of outlets, so linking to another news site or a supporting document in an online news story shouldn't be considered taboo. Journalism expert Jay Rosen calls linking to other sites or sources part of the “ethic of the Web” that is focused on providing verification as a means to “connect knowledge to people” (2008). The refusal of news sites to provide links goes against the “ethic of the Web” and the natural tendencies of Web audiences.

Networked journalists also welcome audience contributions to the production of news. Journalism scholar Charlie Beckett describes the collaborative nature of the technique: “After the story is published—online, in print, wherever—the public can continue to contribute corrections, questions, facts, and perspective, not to mention promotion via links” (2008, p. 46). Duffy (2011) states that technology allows journalists to engage with audiences in ways that would have seemed like science fiction two decades ago.

Audiences can read a report on a Web site and immediately comment about its perspective or veracity. They can also set up a blog to use as an independent vehicle to comment and critique the news. Readers can also offer comments via their Twitter accounts or social networking sites. This reader commentary can include links to information that they view as important – providing a fact-checking service for the media outlets, a task once handled only internally. They can take video of news events with their cell phones and post it on YouTube or even on some news Web sites. They can send SMS messages from their cell phones to compile aggregated information about disasters. (Duffy, 2011, p. 7)

Audiences can also work together to cull thousands of documents to look for newsworthy information, a technique known as “crowdsourcing.” The Pulitzer Prize-winning, non-profit news site ProPublica asked its users to help track spending of U.S. stimulus funds (Jones, 2010). Ushahidi technology creates a graphical interface for crowdsourced information. Users send geo-location information via e-mail or text messages, and Ushahidi places the information onto a Google map. The more reports from a certain area, the bigger the “dot” on the map, allowing the size of the crowd to determine the weight of the news. Ushahidi users have helped locate violence in Kenya after a disputed election and find victims of Haiti's earthquake disaster (Fildes, 2010).

Networked Journalism in the Middle East

Duffy (2011) points to a variety of news reports in the Middle East that used networked journalism. The independent site Little Green Footballs was the first to expose a freelance photographer for Reuters who had altered photos during the Israel/Hezbollah conflict in 2006 to make air strikes from Israel look worse than they were. After criticism from an engaged audience, Reuters quickly dismissed the photographer and tightened its standards. In pre-revolution Egypt, blogs run by amateurs performed roles usually associated with traditional media. In 2005, a video of a vicious police attack on a defenseless citizen was posted on a blog, leading to the arrest of two officers. In 2009, the cell phone video posted on YouTube showing a young woman dying on the streets of Tehran became a rallying point for Iranian protesters. And in 2011, networked journalism helped transform the Middle East. Satellite news stations such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya reported on the uprising and repression using updates from Twitter feeds, social media sites, and YouTube (Allmeling, 2011).

Mainstream outlets collaborated with the audience to report the news from countries like Syria and Libya where tight government controls prevented the free flow of information.

Scholars see networked journalism providing a variety of benefits. According to Beckett (2010), the practice generates editorial diversity—increasing the sources of information—to help create more substantive, authoritative, and varied news reports. Duffy (2011) also notes the increase in credibility. Outlets practicing networked journalism increase trust when they provide links to their source material or publicly answer questions from their audiences.

Duffy's 2011 study of Al Jazeera English found many examples of networked journalism and areas for improvement. For instance, one of the network's interview shows regularly asks viewers to send in questions for future guests, and the network's media criticism program airs opinions from viewers, uploaded via webcam. However, the main news outlet doesn't engage with the audience on Facebook or Twitter. The Al Jazeera site launched a special Ushahidi map to record violence in the Gaza Strip during the Israeli strikes in late 2009 and early 2010. However, close examination of the Ushahidi reporting showed that crowds actually inside the Palestinian territory did not contribute to the map. While Duffy concluded that Al Jazeera had shown great commitment to networked journalism, he also suggested it should continue to hone its craft in this area.

Middle East media outlets suffer from censorship. The media in most Arab countries are rated "not free" by the advocacy group Freedom House, with Kuwait and Lebanon earning a "partly free" rating. Media laws in the region are heavily restrictive, providing little protection for working journalists. The result is a press that is often timid and exercises self-censorship to avoid trouble with authorities. Governments in the Arab world tend to be authoritarian and do not allow journalists to practice the typical watchdog role (Rugh, 2004).

Methodology: Qualitative Analysis

The next part of this paper details a qualitative analysis of several English- and Arabic-language news outlets in the Middle East. The author conducted the analysis in late January and early February of 2011 with an Arabic-speaking research assistant. For each news outlet, they closely examined the website, the Facebook page, and the Twitter feed. The researchers recorded observations using a form identifying each aspect of networked journalism.

Ten news outlets in various Middle Eastern cities were selected, all capitals except for Dubai; Abu Dhabi, UAE; Dubai, UAE; Manama, Bahrain; Doha, Qatar; Cairo, Egypt; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Amman, Jordan; Muscat, Oman; Beirut, Lebanon; and Baghdad, Iraq. English and Arabic versions of the pan-Arab newspaper Ashawq Alawsat, based in London, were examined.

The ten news outlets are established entities with government licenses. Authorities in their countries rarely or never block content from these sites, although discussion forums and blogs are often blocked. Results from the study have no link to any Internet blocks or filtering by authorities.

The authors looked for specific examples of networked journalism. On websites the following were recorded: links to secondary sources in website articles, comments on the website and whether comments were moderated, engagement with the audience in the comment section, requests for user-generated content, and use of Ushahidi maps. On Twitter, the reviewers checked the existence of a Twitter account, number of followers, number following, and whether the media outlet asks for input from the audience or otherwise engages the audience. On Facebook, the following were examined: existence of a Facebook page, number of “fans,” and signs of engagement with the audience.

Results

The results of the website analysis show that few media outlets are engaging in networked journalism through their websites (see Table 1). None of the websites used embedded links in their articles. Similarly, none of the websites asked readers to submit their own content or to take part in constructing Ushahidi maps. Dubai’s *Gulf News* did solicit “citizen journalism” articles from its readers, but not on the website’s home page; readers had to find the information from the printed newspaper.

Approaches to allowing comments on the news articles varied. Some outlets allowed no comments at all although they encouraged redistributing articles via Twitter and Facebook. *Gulf News* and *Al Ittihad* allowed comments, but only on certain articles. Comments were usually not requested for politically sensitive reports.

Although a majority of sites allowed comments on some of their articles, many did not. Administrators moderated all comments on all sites. None of the websites featured robust comment sections, and many of the articles generated either no comments or very few. None of the newspapers used comments as a forum for engaging the audience.

In one intriguing case, the comments were relatively uncensored, and journalists actively engaged the audience. *The Arab News* featured an article about the deaths of some workers (Abbas, 2011). The article stated that three people died in an accident; however, several comments noted that the number of deaths was far higher. But the reporter corrected the commenters and offered further defense of his information. Eventually, the commenters agreed that their reports of higher numbers of deaths came from rumors rather than firsthand information. The exchange drew 38 comments.

As seen in Table 2, more than half the sites have Twitter and Facebook accounts, but the news outlets used them to varying degrees. For instance, *The Jordan Times* boasts an incredible 70,000 Twitter followers, while the Beirut *Daily Star*’s moribund account registers only 57 followers. Most of the outlets don’t follow most of their followers, and some follow zero. However, *The Jordan Times* follows an astounding 70,000 Twitter accounts – a number so high that it’s doubtful anyone could keep up with the updates. Other outlets like *Al Bayan* and *Al Madina* follow large, but manageable, numbers of readers. None of the outlets used Twitter to engage with the audience.

Almost all sites had a Facebook presence, but most used the pages just to disseminate their news. Only one English-language outlet, *Gulf News*, interacted with readers on Facebook.

For instance, *Gulf News* readers were invited to comment on news reports or offer information about their favorite places to exercise. Several Arabic-language Facebook pages featured robust engagement: *Al Ittihad*, *Al Bayan*, and *Al Ahrām* all interacted with lively audiences on the social networking site.

During the uprising in Egypt, *Al Ahrām* invited its readers to ponder the future after Mubarak's resignation. In one odd twist, the official Facebook page for Lebanon's *Annahar* has fewer members than a page set up by a reader. The reader-created page includes robust discussion about the newspaper's reporting. Some outlets, among them *The Arab Times* in Kuwait and *Akhbar al Khaleej* in Sharjah, UAE, use no social media at all.

Discussion

Media outlets in the Middle East are failing to engage the audience through networked journalism. Many websites do not allow comments on their articles, despite the widespread use of this feature by media outlets around the world. Arabic-language papers were far more likely not to offer the ability to comment, probably because of cultural considerations and government censorship. Allowing website comments may not jibe with cultures in which public speech and criticism of ruling officials are discouraged, both subtly and overtly. Some sites appeared to bend to cultural expectations when they removed the commenting feature from stories that might prompt public discussion uncomfortable for the government.

The complete lack of embedded links is also troubling, indicating that websites are still stuck in "print mindset." (This author has submitted editorials with embedded links to *Gulf News* only to have them appear on the website minus links.) While access to source material could easily be provided via hyperlinks, reporters aren't encouraged to do so for the web edition.

Journalists should make an effort to include such links to other sources and original material whenever possible. *The New York Times* has recently embraced this practice; the online version of an article about the creation of a foreign military force in the United Arab Emirates includes a link to a PDF file of the agreement between the government and the contractor (Mazzetti & Hager, 2011).

Limited use of Twitter feeds and Facebook pages shows that newspapers still consider them a one-directional method of communication. With few exceptions, English-language and Arabic-language outlets use these social media vehicles simply to update the news. They don't try to engage readers in conversation or ask them to help generate news. Contrast this with other outlets that routinely use Twitter and Facebook to gather and gauge the news. For instance, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and TBD.com in the United States often ask for information about car accidents, traffic problems, and snowfalls. At times they ask the audience to help find interview subjects for a story (e.g., people who were recently laid off or pulled their children out of public school). They use social media to ask the audience to help report the news. Cultural considerations probably are the reason for this disparity; rather, the difference can be attributed to employees and management that haven't tried to adapt to new technology.

To escape “print mindset,” news outlets in the Middle East must embrace networked journalism by training their older staff members in these new techniques. Hiring recent graduates and encouraging them to use their social media skills could also help change the culture in Arab newsrooms.

The analysis turned up some notable exceptions. The English-language *Gulf News* in Dubai and the Arabic-language *Al Ahrām* in Cairo both actively engage with their audiences. Both efforts concentrate on Facebook, so more attention could be paid to interacting with the audience on Twitter. Privately owned outlets appeared more willing to test networked journalism than their state-owned counterparts.

Gulf News is the only organization that actively solicits “citizen journalism” reports from readers. However, the absence of information about the program online limits its potential. Only readers of the print edition know that the “citizen journalism” program exists. Past reports have spotlighted problems with construction sites, as well as a mosque for poor people that didn’t have running water. *Gulf News* should do more to highlight these audience-generated news stories.

Perhaps the largest mystery revealed by this analysis is the *Jordan Times* Twitter feed. With more than 70,000 followers [actually more than 86,000 at publication], the paper has more Twitter fans than all the other outlets. The reason why is unclear and bears further study.

Conclusion

The Middle East is ripe for a networked journalism revolution. News outlets throughout the region should embrace technology to expand interaction with the audience. As some parts of the region like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya start to move away from government intrusion in the media, perhaps outlets can try harder to practice this type of journalism. But even where governments actively regulate the press, networked journalism can help stretch the boundaries of reporting.

As Pintak (2011) notes in his exhaustive overview of Arab journalism, many reporters see little reason to practice good journalism in environments that stifle the press. In newsrooms where self-censorship and overt censorship prevail, many journalists are lackadaisical about verification and accuracy. Trying to add networked journalism into this environment where journalists and editors would be expected to make extra efforts to report more fully and convey accurate information may simply be too much to ask.

The solution, of course, is a freer press with government-mandated legal protections and more journalism training for reporters who have only known how to practice less-than-aggressive reporting. Media educators in the Middle East can help create a better journalism environment by stressing the benefits of networked journalism and giving potential reporters knowledge of the tools they’ll need to actively engage their audience. Graduating journalism students should understand how to communicate with their audience via Facebook and Twitter. They should also grasp the “ethic of the Web” and the importance of hyperlinking to sources. And these students should see communicating with the audience as an integral part of their job rather than an added annoyance.

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Table 1: Newspaper websites

| Name of Newspaper | Location | Website links | Embedded links | Comments | Audience engagement in comments | User generated content sought | Ushahidi maps |
|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| The National | Abu Dhabi, UAE | www.thenational.ae | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Al Ittihad | Abu Dhabi, UAE | www.alittihad.ae | No | Varied | No | No | No |
| Gulf News | Dubai, UAE | www.gulfnews.com | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Al Bayan | Dubai, UAE | www.albayan.ae | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| The Peninsula | Doha, Qatar | www.thepeninsulaqatar.com | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Al Arab | Qatar | www.alarab.com.qa | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Arab News | Riyadh, SA | www.arabnews.com | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Al Medina | Jeddah | www.almadina.com | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Asharq Alawsat | London | www.asharqe.com | No | No | No | No | No |
| Asharq | London | www.aawsat.com | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Jordan Times | Amman, Jordan | www.jordantimes.com | No | No | No | No | No |
| Addustour | Amman | www.addustour.com | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Arab Times | Kuwait | www.arabtimesonline.com | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Al Qabas | Kuwait | www.alqabas.com.kw | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Daily Star | Beirut, Lebanon | www.dailystar.com.lb | No | No | No | No | No |
| An Nahar | Beirut, Lebanon | www.annahar.com | No | No | No | No | No |
| Oman Daily Observer | Muscat, Oman | www.main.omanobserver.com | No | No | No | No | No |
| Gulf Daily News | Manama, Bahrain | www.gulf-daily-news.com | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Akhbar Alkhaleej | Bahrain | www.akhbar-alkhaleej.com | No | No | No | No | No |
| Aswat Al Iraq | Baghdad, Iraq | en.aswataliraq.info | No | No | No | No | No |

Table 1: Newspaper websites (Cont.)

| Name of Newspaper | Location | Website links | Embedded links | Comments | Audience engagement in comments | User generated content sought | Ushahidi maps |
|-------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| Baghdad | Iraq, Baghdad | www.baghdad-news.com | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Egyptian Gazette | Cairo, Egypt | http://213.158.162.45/~egyptian/ | No | Yes, moderated | No | No | No |
| Al Ahram | Cairo, Egypt | www.ahram.org.eg | No | No | No | No | No |

Table 2: Twitter and Facebook activity

| Name of Newspaper | Social Media User? | Twitter Followers | Twitter Following | Twitter Engagement | Facebook Presence | Facebook Likes | Facebook Interaction |
|---------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| The National | No | 6,344 | 152 | No | Yes | 588 | No |
| Al Ittihad | No | N/A | N/A | N/A | Yes | 1,204 | No |
| Gulf News | Yes | 7,271 | 135 | No | Yes | 1,759 | Yes |
| Al Bayan | Yes | 583 | 0 | No | Yes | 173 | No |
| The (Qatar) Peninsula | Yes | 618 | 90 | No | No | N/A | N/A |
| Al Arab | Yes | 412 | 84 | No | Yes | 714 | No |
| Arab News (Riyadh) | Yes | 1,528 | 0 | No | Yes | 3,766 | No |
| Al Medina | Yes | 2,504 | 841 | No | Yes | 306 | Yes |
| Asharq Alawsat | Yes | 121 | 21 | No | Yes | 232 | No |
| Asharq | Yes | 2,560 | 42 | No | Yes | 285 | No |
| Jordan Times | Yes | 70,945 | 70,401 | No | Yes | 15,728 | No |
| Addustour | Yes | 550 | 0 | No | Yes | 6,105 | No |
| Arab Times (Kuwait) | No | N/A | N/A | N/A | No | N/A | N/A |
| Al Qabas | Yes | 2,254 | 70 | No | Yes | 404 | No |
| Daily Star | Yes | 57 | 1 | No | Yes | 7 | No |
| An Nahar | No | N/A | N/A | N/A | Yes | 80 | Yes |
| Oman Daily Observer | No | N/A | N/A | N/A | Yes | 17 | No |
| Gulf Daily News (Bahrain) | Yes | 583 | 0 | No | Yes | 178 | No |
| Akhbar Alkhaleej | No | N/A | N/A | N/A | No | N/A | N/A |
| Aswat Al Iraq | Yes | 39 | 0 | No | Yes | 39 | No |
| Baghdad | No | N/A | N/A | N/A | No | N/A | N/A |
| Egyptian Gazette | No | N/A | N/A | N/A | Yes | 160 | Yes |
| Al Ahram | Yes | 9,738 | 20 | No | Yes | 41,726 | Yes |